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NAVY MEDICINE IN FOCUS

I AM NAVY MEDICINE

BY VJOHNSON – MARCH 28, 2014

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A Few Words from a Navy Medicine Doctor



For as long as I can recall, I have been interested in medicine and aviation. Therefore, when the Navy gave me the option to defer the remainder of my orthopaedic surgery residency and serve a tour as a Naval Flight Surgeon, I leapt at this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Of course, I never dreamed it would lead to an assignment as the flight surgeon to the world's premier jet demonstration squadron, the U.S. Navy's Blue Angels.

After my internship at National Naval Medical Center Bethesda, I reported to the Naval Aerospace Medicine Institute at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida, where I ultimately earned my flight surgeon wings—nearly 70 years to the day after my grandfather had done the same at the outset of World War II. My initial assignment was to Carrier Air Wing Nine in the Pacific



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Fleet, where I immediately made a seven-month deployment aboard the aircraft carrier the USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74) in support of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As one of two flight surgeons responsible for the care of the air wing’s 1,800 men and women, I lived in close quarters among my patients. This is a unique existence in modern medicine, and I absolutely loved it. As a relatively young physician, this experience of near daily interaction with my patients offered tremendous opportunities to gain practical medical knowledge and grow in independence—all while serving alongside some of our nation’s most talented and dedicated citizens.

Many of the cases were mundane, but others were far from ordinary. One memorable case involved a new-onset seizure patient, who had fallen and fractured his femur. We were too far from land to evacuate him via helicopter, so we secured him in the cargo hold of a C-2A Greyhound for the catapult launch from the carrier. We flew three hours to the nearest American ally airfield, where we exited the plane and hopped straight into a turning MH-60 helicopter, which flew us another hour or so to a U.S. Army hospital in Kuwait where the care for both the patient’s seizure condition and his badly broken leg were optimized. Accompanying this patient—this shipmate—throughout his ordeal epitomizes the culture of Navy Medicine: serve those who serve. These amazing people are the reason why I love my job as a Navy physician.

Today, I find myself in my last year as the flight surgeon to the Blue Angels as we commence our 2014 show season. My job with the Blues is analogous to that of a physician to a world-class athletic team. My patients are among the healthiest and the fittest individuals on the planet. My job is to keep them that way. Even a mild head cold can be life-threatening in a jet traveling at high speeds and extremely low altitudes.



The Blue Angel demonstration pilots will repeatedly experience seven and a half times the force of gravity pressing down on their bodies during our 45 minute flight demonstration. These forces, which can approach 1,500 pounds, make the pilot’s blood pool in their legs, potentially starving their brain of oxygen and causing them to blackout. The team members will endure this daily during 300 days of travel each year. This grinding schedule requires close medical supervision and a rigorous six-days-a-week physical conditioning program in order for the squadron to perform at its best.

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To be a part of such a high performing organization like the Blue Angels is itself an absolute honor; and of course, the chance to fly occasionally in the back seat of a blue jet doesn't hurt either. It is, however, the opportunity to represent the United States Navy and Marine Corps to the American public that is the best part of my job. Part of the Blue Angels' mission is to encourage and foster service and excellence in others. This may be in uniform or out. Still, as President Kennedy famously remarked, "I can imagine no more rewarding a career. And any man who may be asked in this century what he did to make his life worthwhile, I think can respond with a good deal of pride and satisfaction: 'I served in the United States Navy.'" I couldn't agree more.

My name is Mark DeBuse and I Am Navy Medicine.



About vjohnson